Health and Well-Being in Later Midlife: The Role of Companion Animals

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Abstract

Family, social support and physical activity are key dimensions of healthy aging. This paper uses data from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) 2011 Internet Survey and the HRS 2012 Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) module to examine the relationship between multiple health outcomes and pet ownership as well as physical activity associated with pet ownership (e.g., dog walking). The HRS is the first nationally representative survey in the United States to include measures of human-animal interaction in this detail. Family structure and companion animal ownership will be used to predict self-rated mental and physical health, depression and social support. This paper will contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between companion animals and the social, physical and mental well-being of the HRS study population. In addition, this paper seeks to encourage other researchers in the US to include measures of human-animal interaction in their population-based surveys.

Purpose of the proposed paper

Research on human-animal interactions (HAI) has focused on the health and well-being aspects of companion animals for people of all ages (see Beck and Meyers, 1996; Edney, 1992; Thorpe et al., 2006; Wells, 2009). Pets are often given the status of family members (Cain, 1985; Sanders, 2003). Yet, like family relationships, having a companion animal can be both burdensome and rewarding. This may explain why, although research on human-animal interaction has demonstrated a variety of positive outcomes for individuals, the mechanisms behinds those relationships are often unclear.

In 2008, NICHD and the WALTHAM® Centre for Pet Nutrition, a division of Mars, Inc., entered into a public-private partnership to study human-animal interaction. This partnership seeks to encourage HAI research as it relates to child health and development as well as to health and development across the life course. To date, this partnership has sponsored multiple funding opportunity announcements to encourage such research.

Despite this effort there remain significant gaps in our knowledge of the social and health consequences of human-animal interaction. While more than 60% of American households own at least one pet (APPA 2011), few population representative surveys collect data on pet ownership and human-animal relationships. A number of major surveys in Europe and Australia have incorporated HAI measures but, to date, survey researchers in the United States have been slow to incorporate questions related to human-animal interaction. If questions are included they are often related to a single topic. For example, dog ownership and walking data has been collected by a few smaller studies including the Michigan Behavioral Risk Factor Survey and the Health, Aging and Body Composition Study.

We proposed the inclusion of an HAI module in the HRS 2012 and our proposal was accepted. This module and the pet-related questions included in the 2011 HRS Internet Survey, will be analyzed in this paper, representing an important step forward for understanding the population health impact of companion animals. Questions addressed by this paper include: what impact does having and interacting with a pet have on the social, emotional and cognitive abilities of individuals in later midlife? To what extent do pets serve as a buffer in family and social dynamics? Under what conditions does dog ownership promote walking activity?

This paper will contribute to a better understanding of the social, physical and mental well-being of the HRS study population. Our goal is to demonstrate the importance of including pets in the measurement of the household environment and to contribute to a better understanding of how pet ownership and the human-animal bond contribute to multiple dimensions of well-being across the life course.

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